NEWVOICEMEDIA

Next Generation Customer Service

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Welcome To This Whitepaper

I was recently invited by NewVoiceMedia and salesforce.com to translate a workshop I run on Next Generation Customer Service into a webinar and whitepaper format. Since the workshop format can spread over a couple of days, I had to find a way of summarising the key themes and insights.

The result is a set of discussion points ready to use as a framework for your own plans. They work best when taken together since they reflect a certain mindset and strategic perspective. Thus re-enforcing each other.

The material I've provided both here and in the archived webinar (www.newvoicemedia.com/resources/webinars) gives you plenty to think about. The ideas are challenging to realise, but so is the commercial world in which we now exist.

Therefore I've positioned this version of 'Next Generation Customer Service' as more of a transformative step-change, than an evolution of today's norm.

Why? Well for a couple of reasons. If Customer Service is to ever live up to its potential and meet the expectations of all its stakeholders, it needs to re-invent itself. Secondly we live in fast moving times. The combined effect of 'Social Channels', 'Mobile', 'Big Data' and 'Cloud' is redefining how customers and brands engage and do business together. As a result a whole new set of Customer Service expectations are now incubating in the eye of this particular storm.

It's all about 'Going Radical" in order to keep up.

A Framework For Thinking About The Big Issues In Next Generation Customer Service

There is a loose kind of logic that puts the following ten discussion points in a particular order. The more contextual stuff sits at the top of the list, while the more operational appear later on. That said, there is no harm in choosing whatever topic most appeals and making that your starting point.

I've given each topic a title to characterise its focus and then provided you with two ideas under each topic. The first defines what you are aiming to achieve. The second suggests a key action you can take to realise that aim. Finally I've added some commentary to fill out the idea and provide further hooks for discussion.

Of course there is much more detail that needs to be surfaced before any actual implementation, but there is enough to catalyse a valuable group discussion.

I reckon that's all the background you need to get going. Let's now look at the framework point by point.
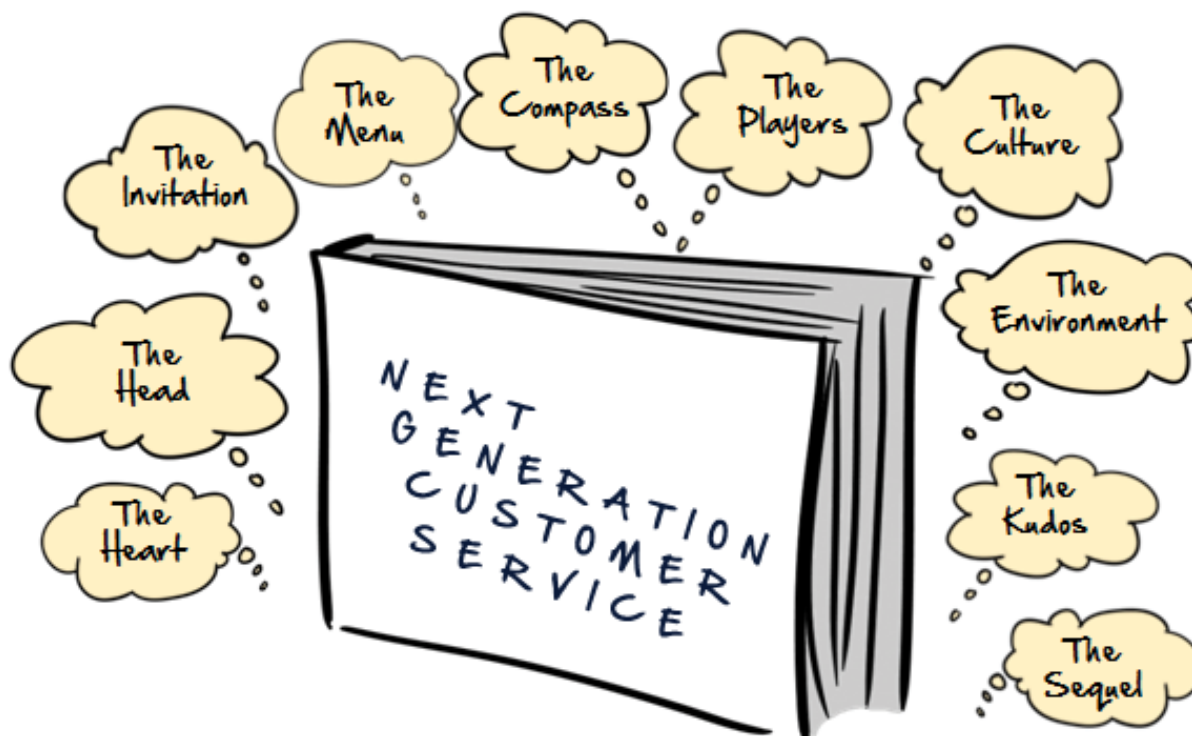
The Heart

Aim

Based on the sum total of what you have learnt from them, imagine the way your customers want to experience doing business with you.

Key Action

Continuously share that vision internally.

When you are building something it makes sense to have a clear idea of what you want the end result to look like. It is easier to picture and describe a house than it is to image what a combination of cement, brick, wood, glass and steel might become. In other words, the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts in our imagination.

Unfortunately Customer Service is often considered piecemeal. An incremental series of cost-justified steps to move the game forward bit by bit. The dots never get joined up. So what we intend to become, as a service business, remains opaque: both to ourselves and others.

Hence the aim of this idea is to provide a context to your Next Generation Customer Service strategy. By painting an uncompromised picture of how customers want to experience doing business with you. At each stage of their involvement with you: from prospect to repeat customer to advocate.

The description you should be aiming for is not a statement borne out of the limitations of budget or a lack of corporate ambition. Quite the opposite in fact. It needs to be the 'whole' picture of everything that customers have provided through feedback, surveys and analysed interactions. It's their story and their priorities – unvarnished.

The reason why you then want to share this internally is to amplify the real voice of the customer and what matters from their point of view. You are acting as ambassador to their interests. Even if you never achieve delivery of that pure vision, it still has real value as a more authentic version than internally generated priorities. It keeps the rest of the organisation aware of the customers' perspective and the journey still to be travelled.

It's uncensored, idealistic and from the heart.

The Head

Aim
Reposition the value of Customer Service as a strategic asset versus a cost centre

Key Action
Develop customer insight services and customer lifecycle management as hooks

For many service organisations, the greatest hindrance to becoming more effective is internal perceptions. The typical mindset sees Customer Service as a cost that needs to be aggressively managed. It has little upside or strategic value. In reality, it exists to catch the fallout that naturally comes from doing business. So its prime function is to provide a reactive, mopping up service.

Some organisations still maintain that view. Others have evolved to at least theoretically accept the commercial impact that service has on customer experience, loyalty, repurchase and advocacy. Within that group, some have also learnt to use post interaction feedback and interaction analytics to drive actionable insight. An important step since it's the basis on which to pitch a more strategic role for Customer Service to the rest of the business.

The question remains though whether these developments have yet translated into greater status for Customer Service. "It's still early days" is probably the most optimistic answer. So the idea being put forward here is to accelerate this critical goal by boosting the value that Customer Service is seen to deliver back to the rest of the business.

One way is to proactively offer customer insight services to other functions. This is a massive opportunity when effectively executed. Eliminating failure demand in customer service remains a huge and mainly untapped opportunity to reduce budget waste. Particularly, when the source of failure comes from other teams and needs verifiable proof to overcome inertia.

Of equal value is the ability to spot market trends, new product needs, competitor activity and so forth. These insights remain invisible during the course of normal business in most Customer Service operations. However once mined and tied back to CRM customer meta data, the value of archived service interactions to the rest of the organisation grows exponentially.

So building a set of insight services that help other parts of the business is one initiative towards changing internal perceptions.

The second suggestion plays on the One Agenda theme (explored in another NewVoiceMedia whitepaper called 'One Agenda For Customer Engagement' (http://bit.ly/OneAgenda).

Sales, Marketing and Service teams have the ability to co-ordinate their activities around a lifecycle view of customers. In other words they can see the full picture of a customer's value and history by leveraging cloud access to the same interaction and CRM infrastructure across all three teams.

One Agenda is all about is one view, one set of rules and a common agreement on how to develop customer value.

The Invitation

Aim
Enlist customers and advisors as co-creators of Next Generation Customer Service

Key Action
Create communication platforms to listen and learn from your key stakeholders

There is growing evidence of the benefits that co-creation or crowdsourcing brings. It allows organisations to tap into the collective intelligence of key stakeholders. Case studies suggest multiple benefits for both sides in terms of valuable innovation and stronger relationship ties through the process of engagement.

Two of the most obvious stakeholder groups for Customer Service are customers and those who know them best – the front line advisors.

Many organisations already ask customers for feedback on their service performance. It remains a novelty though to invite them imagine how to improve the service. Equally it remains uncommon to tap into the latent insight held by front line advisors whose daily interactions rapidly build into a valuable source of insight.

Therefore a key action is to develop ways of effectively listening and learning from these cohorts. For it to work though, investment is needed to motivate and reward participation. Often that can simply be the recognition of being listened to and seeing ideas being acted on. Of course this means listening, evaluation and deployment workflows need activating to make this idea work.

This approach has been successfully pioneered in many peer to peer communities set up initially for resolving Customer Service issues. These have then evolved into a rich source of new ideas for product innovation.

The Giffgaff site is a great example of this in action.
(http://bit.ly/giffgaff-ideas)

The Menu

Aim

Commit to building a capability that can match service personalisation against customer value

Key Action

Translate evolving customer channel preferences into clearly promoted service experiences

Perhaps the most elusive goal for mass market Customer Service operations has been personalisation. The lack of it commonly features in the top criticisms customers have after interacting with call centres. In fact much of the current enthusiasm for social Customer Service comes from the personal and human touch that is so often absent from traditional forms of Customer Service.

So acknowledging its desirability, can it be achieved? The answer is yes. Providing your interaction infrastructure is tightly linked with your customer data, then all forms of personalised routing becomes possible.

For the last twenty years the technical wizardry behind this has been too expensive and complex to have enjoyed broad support. Skill based routing has been as far as we have got in terms of segmenting customer queues to best match demand with capability. But having a team to handle voice, and one to handle text or even a sub group to handle 140 character texting has not made a noticeable difference to customers and their situations.

Why? Simply because it has not resulted in an experience of personalised service. However, what does make the difference is being able to recognise and respond to a customer's individual circumstance. This consciously affects the resulting customer experience.

So what kind of circumstances would form the basis of personalised routing strategies?

What about customers who are deemed VIP? Probably as a result of their actual or potential value to your business. This segment could receive priority routing or be routed to more senior levels in your organisation.

Think about the in-vogue topic of 'customer effort'. One way to practically measure that is to track the frequency of inbound interactions. If a threshold is triggered within a prescribed timeframe then a special intervention takes place that begins by recognising there has been as problem (confirmed by a human scan of the customer's interaction history).

Here's another idea: You could experiment routing according to generation (by the recorded age of the customer where it is known) and see if it increases the likelihood of empathy through common values and thereby NPS scores.

Extending that idea even further, Frank Eliason (of Comcast fame) recently described to me (during a Twitter debate on using Klout score for customer routing) an idea he has termed 'scalable intimacy'

An interesting idea. Time will tell if it can be made to work.

Frank Eliason @FrankEliason
@martinhw longer term I support scalable intimacy. For example routing /custserv calls to people w/ similar interests creating relationships

The point is this. We are now in an era of trying to figure out how we can scale a personalised approach. Mass ongoing experimentation is needed. Enabling Customer Services to directly manage their own routing strategies based on listening and learning from customers is the way forward.

Cloud-based solutions facilitate this.

The Compass

Aim

Invest in dashboarding the real time KPIs that most matter to each stakeholder group you serve

Key Action

Invest in making reporting simple and relevant in relation to priority decisions

It's no surprise to anyone familiar with the operational life of contact centres to say that they are data rich, insight poor environments. However, historic views, painfully built from spreadsheet manipulation, are thankfully being replaced with real time, visual dashboards. This allows us to recover the original purpose of having reports in the first place. Making informed decisions.

So the time is right to seize the moment and overhaul the value that can be had from these browser based scoreboards. On a regular basis (every year?) it is good practice to vigorously prune back the volume of reporting which will have silently started clogging up inboxes during the previous twelve months. Then re-audit the need that key stakeholders have for information.

What are the KPIs that really matter to them and their priorities? What are the priority decisions you need your own team to get right and what information do they need for that?

Less is more as far as management information is concerned.

The Players

Aim

Recruit the talent you need for your vision rather than sustain the culture and budget you now have

Key Action

Translate service experiences into the profile of people that can deliver them

According to the Institute of Customer Service, UK call centre advisors are paid 34% under the national average which pretty much sums up the cost control attitude organisations have taken to their Customer Service operations. No surprise then that average attrition remains between 20%-25% according to industry source ContactBabel.

Beyond the issue of pay, the lack of career progression and the rigid factory style culture has put off many from entering the industry. It is also a matter of frustration that the UK has so far failed to tap into the richer pool of experience that a home workforce can offer. The US market has proved its viability. Why not here?

If that summarises the advisor community, then the team leading community is in need of equal attention. In recognition of the need to move from an administrative role to an active coaching role, there is currently much interest in re-profiling the role and understanding the ideal skill set to drive a more quality, externally focussed agenda.

In summary it is time to change how we view the human capital in Customer Service. In spite of a blind faith in the ability to automate, we are now rediscovering that people remain central to an effective service operation across all major channels: call centre, e-commerce and social. Top down expectations to deliver a positive customer experience mean a whole new approach to engaging a workforce who in turn need to engage customers.

Therefore a crucial part of your next generation strategy is to up the game on the quality of people you employ by significantly enhancing the career opportunity on offer.

Experts in customer experience are fond of saying that a great experience is no accident and is the result of deliberate design. In that sense, Customer Service delivers well rehearsed scripts.

Make sure you have the quality of players to provide a convincing performance.

The Culture

Aim

Practice excellence in everything you do in recognition that we imitate what we see

Key Action

Make this the major currency of success for every role within your service operation

Any parent will recognise the never ending scrutiny of their children. After all we learn through imitation, particularly from those close to us and in 'authority' roles. In spite of the often used tactic 'Do as I say, not as I do', history shows we don't much care for that approach and imitate whatever behaviour we associate with success.

Translate that behavioural trait into the context of Customer Service and the issue becomes one of what example should be set as the cultural norm. Being great at Customer Service is no easy challenge. In fact it comes from ongoing obsession with the detail of the 'little things'. That's what made Apple the powerhouse it is today. That is what has protected Burberry from the fate that other high fashion iconic brands such as Aquascutum have recently suffered.

These winners teach us that obsession is a state of mind that applies to everything undertaken. They do all things well. I can personally verify that even the fridges in Burberry are 'on message'. Such is their obsession with getting everything 'just exactly perfect'.

Back in Customer Service World, that means everything from internal communications, performance reviews, environment, team meetings etc. are all undertaken from the perspective of being excellent. This is accepted in recognition that each and every situation conveys its own message to those who witness it.

If you accept the argument that it is not possible to set the service bar at 'excellent' without embracing that as a way of working, it then follows that it should become a major aspect of what is rewarded as success in each role within the service operation.

If you sit in authority, then setting that expectation in all others is the most powerful way to facilitate a culture intolerant of mediocrity.

The Environment

Aim

Make the impact of where people work as visually inspiring as possible

Key Action

Empower a design team to find low cost ways of refreshing their co-workers connection with customers

All work can become routine. Customer Service is no exception. Each customer interaction can start to sound like the one before and the one before that…

In fact inbound call analysis will inevitably show that advisors have to tackle the same issues over and over. So it is understandable that boredom sets in. Instead of listening to the customer, hearing takes over and autopilot kicks in.

However that is no comfort to the individual customer who expects it to be right in every way. The fact they are your 138th 'performance' of the day is irrelevant to them.

So what's to be done?

It is certainly the job of the team leader to keep things interesting. We've already discussed a devotion to 'excellence' so that even the mundane is tackled well. But 'every little helps'. So can environment play a role in keeping things fresh?

I reckon so - my contribution would include:

- Repainting walls in bright colours
- Blowing up customer comments so they can be read from the other side of the call centre
- Plastering large images of real customers in line of sight

Anything to attract attention and engage everyone's interest. In fact I believe it is worth recruiting a team to figure all this out. As part of their sense of ownership, give the people who live Customer Service the opportunity to inspire themselves.

It doesn't have to cost significantly, just imagination and a site manager who says 'yes' more often than 'no'.

The Kudos

Aim

Promote the successes of Customer Service via internal and external influence networks

Key Action

Move beyond industry awards. Measure the perception of value

Part of getting Customer Service repositioned in both internal and external eyes is good ol' fashioned promotion. Got to keep 'front on mind' if you want a message to sink in.

I have noticed since Marketing has arrived via social Customer Service, that their natural instinct to promote has helped. Just scroll down page one of Google results when searching for 'Virgin Media and Peppa Pig' for an example of what I'm talking about. Simple but brilliant.

Outside the 'chase for headlines', there are other good reasons to take the idea of Kudos seriously. Much of what Customer Service achieves remains invisible. Social channels help in that respect. The transparency of interaction allows the world to see your Customer Service in action.

Perception is an important part of expectation management. If you are seen to be trustworthy, competent and committed to be helping customers, you are more likely to keep most customers on side if things go wrong. So making sure that your successes are well-aired is smart. Southwest Airlines has just launched a reality TV show allowing the world in to see its Customer Service operation in action. No doubt hoping that such transparency rubs off to their advantage.

Be smart and also think about who is influential both internally and externally. Peer to peer communities are good examples of cultivating so called 'super users' who can have a tremendously powerful effect when praising your organisation.

Finally, think beyond industry awards. There is nothing wrong with them as a way to demonstrate achievement and put some trophies on display in reception. But in the context of Next Generation, a deeper look into what you want recognised is needed. The place to start is to focus on value. What matters to your stakeholders? How well you are delivering against those metrics?

How do you get recognition for that?

The Sequel

Aim

Imagine beyond Next Generation to give clues of greater things to come

Key Action

Gamify the description of Customer Service 10 years out

As I said at the outset of this framework, it would be challenging. So you might wonder why you are already being encouraged to focus beyond your Next Generation plan? Surely enough already?

The reason is to avoid strategy obsolescence. Customer Service is now being subjected to a level of change it has never faced in its history. Imagining what is coming next keeps imaginations open and helps maintain an urgency to be prepared.

For instance, we are rapidly entering the age of Mobility. Smartphone ownership is now north of 50% in both UK & US. Broadband speeds either via 4G on-the-move or fibre at home are both imminent. Apps that factor in service as part of an overall engagement strategy are already out there. Being successful at delivering service to customers with smartphones will be a real stretch and tax our ability to provide simplified, personalised, real time resolutions. Queues are out for a start!

That is just one example.

So in this fast changing world, you need to focus on both delivering your Next Gen plan and keeping track of what will be coming after that.

One way to keep attention of these emerging trends is to turn the whole research and reporting process into a challenge. Or in today's language, 'gamify' it with recognition and rewards for those who take part. Recruit broadly.

They could be from anywhere in or outside the business. All they need is an eye for what's coming.

In Conclusion

I hope this framework of ten ideas has provoked new thoughts and determination to propel your own service organisation forward. It is an exciting time to work in Customer Service. The opportunity to become central to your organisation's success is real and in grasp.

Take it. Get Radical!

Martin Hill-Wilson: Brainfood Consulting

Martin Hill-Wilson is a long standing member of the UK customer service community. He currently works as an independent under the Brainfood brand with a range of clients focussing on customer related strategy assignments. He also participates as conference speaker, workshop facilitator and blogger in his role of passing on best practice and next generation thinking. Current topics include social customer service and the broader issues involved in becoming a social business.

About NewVoiceMedia

NewVoiceMedia introduced the ContactWorld Platform in 2006 to bring Cloud technology to the contact centre market, and radically change the way that businesses receive and deliver their calls.

ContactWorld is an enterprise class contact centre, delivered via a true cloud model. It is rapidly scalable, end-user configurable and provides powerful functionality to deliver the technology and information that drives effective contact centres. Our customers benefit from fast, flexible and cost effective access to contact centre capabilities that would normally be very complicated, expensive and slow to acquire, integrate and use.

Rather than having to buy expensive software from multiple vendors, spend months integrating everything, and then being locked into that solution for years, we provide the whole solution as a service that customers access for a monthly fee per agent per month.

The ContactWorld platform provides a market leading 99.999% service availability SLA, and processes hundreds of millions of calls, for thousands of agents working across the globe. We have customers in 14 countries on 5 continents, including Berry Bros & Rudd, Long Tall Sally, QlikTech, Royal Mail, SHL Group and Parcelforce.

NewVoiceMedia Products

ContactWorld offers customers an incredibly rich suite of integrated contact centre technologies. We leverage a company's customer data to provide complex data driven routing of their calls on a real time basis to deliver enquiries to the most appropriate agents.

Customers can select from different modules to build a plan that will handle their calls most effectively. The solution can be implemented in days not months, additional users can be added in minutes, and home agents activated instantly, in response to demand fluctuations.

ContactWorld for Salesforce is a fully certified solution providing seamless CTI integration into Salesforce CRM. All users benefit from a single, easy to use interface to manage their calls, and view all contacts, accounts, leads, opportunities and cases.

Calls can be prioritised and routed accurately, based upon the data stored within a business's Salesforce CRM records and agents are presented with a link to the caller's details for a full history of contact with the company. ContactWorld for Salesforce requires no adaptors or APIs to transform how contacts and customers are handled when they interact with an organisation, and works effectively on Mac or PC.

All merchants who accept payment by cards over the phone are required to be PCI-DSS (Payment Card Industry Data Security Standards) compliant to ensure their customers' card details are not compromised.

ContactWorld PCI is a fully PCI DSS compliant interactive voice response (IVR) solution to securely process credit card transactions over the telephone. The technology removes the agent from the payment transaction by automating the process to meet data security standards, and reduce the risk of fraud.

NewVoiceMedia Services

All NewVoiceMedia customers have access to comprehensive training and support. The Professional Services team works closely with all customers to design call plans and agree rules to be configured when they go live. "Training the Trainer" is a key part of the approach, ensuring that all customers have the ability to configure the system to meet their specific needs.

In addition, all customers have access to free Customer Support from the NewVoiceMedia Service Desk. The team is available 24/7 to answer queries and requests. ContactWorld users can also log cases via the support portal and view the solutions resource for answers.

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